

Comments for the Public Forum Regarding the Sabino Canyon Mountain Lion Controversy

March 19, 2004

To Whom It May Concern;

First I would like to thank Representative Ted Downing for calling this meeting and giving an opportunity for the general public to express its opinions regarding the current mountain lion situation at Sabino Canyon. I also congratulate the many people who have worked so hard to bring about a fair and humane resolution to this problem, one that will serve to protect the public and the mountain lions as well.

At this point I oppose any proposed action by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (Game and Fish) to kill the lions in Sabino Canyon.

I consider myself to be an environmentalist, a naturalist. I am not anti-Game and Fish or anti-hunter. Indeed, I am a hunter myself. Nor am I a lion expert, although I have been involved for many years in doing mountain lion research (track counts) and believe that I know a little bit about these cats. By profession I am a high school teacher.

The fact is we are at this place we find ourselves because of a previous lack of action by Game and Fish and by the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service).

I hike Sabino Canyon regularly and shortly after the Aspen fire I began to notice abnormally large numbers of deer in the canyon, herds of up to 12 animals whereas 3 to 5 is the average. I knew immediately that lions would follow the deer and expressed my concerns on this in a letter to noted lion authority Harley Shaw. I felt that certainly Game and Fish and Forest Service would also anticipate this scenario and have in place a plan of action. Obviously they did not. Suddenly we have an emergency, one which finds District Ranger Larry Raley proclaiming in front page headlines that an attack "is imminent." (A position I very much disagree with)

If there is a problem, it was caused by Game and Fish and Forest Service. And while they have a duty to protect the public, they also have a duty to protect wildlife.

In my opinion there are several things that could have been done and can still be done. These include:

- (1) Putting together a team of lion experts – biologists – to appraise the seriousness of the situation and to help develop a plan of action to address it. I suggest Harley Shaw, Paul Beier, Kenny Logan, Lisa Haynes, and Kevin Hanson – all are within several hours driving distance of Tucson.

- (2) Close – for as long as it takes – the side hiking trails in Lower Sabino Canyon. Many people tend to run and jog on these trails and this constitutes a “high risk” activity that might trigger off a predatory attack by a mountain lion.
- (3) Attempt any and all means of hazing to push the lions out of lower Sabino and into the backcountry. I specifically suggest shooting them in the rear-end with rubber bullets, or salt, with a load of ammo that makes a very loud accompanying noise.
- (4) Initiate a serious program to educate people on how to conduct themselves in mountain lion country. A few signs and flyers will serve to only interest additional people to come to Sabino in hope of seeing a lion!
- (5) Identify the threat level – if one even exists – of each individual lion. The fact that Game and Fish does not even know how many lions there are in the canyon tells me that they do not know enough to make an informed judgment as to what to do about this situation. (Hence the need to bring in the experts that I spoke of earlier).
- (6) If individual lions are indeed identified as being potential risks, I would support their removal, or, as a last resort, killing. Game and Fish has said – a little disingenuously I believe – that lions can not be successfully relocated or even placed in zoological facilities. I disagree with this position. Certainly I know of no research that supports this assumption. I suspect that the success or failure of wild lions placed in facilities has much to do with the age of the lion itself. If, as I believe, the Sabino lions are young lions, they might very well thrive in captivity. As a first choice Game and Fish should release any captured animal to a more remote mountain range. The argument against this is that they will be unable to adjust and will simply die anyway. Again, I know of no research that supports this assumption either. The fact is that we do not know these assumptions to be true. Again, I suspect that the reluctance of Game and Fish to relocate bears and lions has more to do with politics and avoiding a possible lawsuit (which I will address momentarily) than it does with the welfare of the animal involved. These lions could be radio-collared and monitored, and by doing so, we might learn a lot more about lion behavior.

The major point that I again wish to stress is that we should be dealing with the Sabino lions as individual animals. One of the problems with wildlife managers is that they tend to see animals in terms of populations not individuals. I wince every time I hear a biologist state that killing one or four lions will not hurt the Santa Catalina lion population. The fact is that if there are, say, four lions in Sabino (and it amazes me that we do not even know exactly how many lions we have there), there might very well be four different solutions to the problem. Some may simply be expected to move away on their own, some may be hazed out, some may be captured and relocated or placed in a zoological facility, and some may need to be destroyed. Why is it that biologists and wildlife managers see things so simplistically? This is a classic case of not being able to see the trees for the forest.

The fact is that while we know much about mountain lions, what we do not know could fill a book. Most lion research – and in Arizona all lion research has been driven by the status of the mountain lion as a huntable big-game animal. We know what we need to know in order to more successfully kill lions, but beyond that, we know little else.

One example of this is an often-repeated statement that has been used time and time again by Game and Fish, namely that the Sabino lions no longer exhibit a natural fear of man. I for one do not believe that lions – or any wild animal for that matter – possesses an innate, so-called natural fear of man. Fear is a learned or conditioned behavior that is often exhibited in a hunted animal population. The Sabino lions, and this is especially if they are young lions, are not part of a hunted population. Cats are cats. They are naturally curious. I have reviewed the summary list of lion sighting and incidents related to the Sabino lions and quite frankly see nothing out of the ordinary. Noted lion biologist Paul Beier agrees with this assessment (letter to Sandy Bahr). Consequently, adverse condition might very well work. In reality, the Sabino lions are guilty of nothing more than being lions.

While the passions of many people have been aroused by plight of the Sabino lions, the fact is that since the Anna Knochel lawsuit of 1996, Game and Fish has destroyed perhaps – in most cases needlessly I might add - hundreds of bears and lions in the name of public (or livestock) safety. While I do not know the details of the Knochel case, it seems that Game and Fish should never settled this matter out of court at the cost of what some say may have been 2.5 million dollars. This decision set a dangerous precedent that has led to the indiscriminate slaughter of countless animals on the mere suspicion that they might be dangerous or cause damage. This madness must stop. Our wildlife policies – towards all species – must be driven by sound science, not fear.

If nothing else comes out of this Sabino lion situation, it is my hope that Representative Downing and his colleagues in the Arizona legislature will pass some sort of a “no-fault” legislation designed to keep Game and Fish, and other agencies and individuals, from being sued over the actions of wildlife. Wildlife and especially the large carnivores like lions and bears need “champions” in the Arizona legislature. I hope that some of our elected officials have the courage to stand up to the trial lawyer lobby and become those champions.

In all due respect towards the current Commissioners of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, we need to make some serious changes there as well. Wildlife in Arizona belongs to all of us, not just the hunters. The makeup of the Game and Fish Commission should reflect this fact. If and when Governor Janet Napolitano and/or future governors are given the opportunity to appoint new commissioners, they should do so from the ranks of the scientific and conservation community. As people begin to encroach more and more into wildlife habitat, situations such as the current Sabino lion controversy will only increase. We can not go on with “business as usual” when it comes to managing all species of wildlife. Hunting is just one component of the man-wildlife relationship. . In Arizona, however, hunting interests completely drives our wildlife polices. The Tonto National Forest mountain lion eradication program is a classic example of this. The

Game and Fish Department, despite the objections of almost every respected biologist and against 75% of public opinion, went ahead with this terribly and mismanaged project. Why? It was because the project was supported and partly financed by the powerful Desert Bighorn Sheep Society – an anti-predator, pro-sheep hunting organization. Again, this is another example of madness that has to stop. We badly need to bring balance to the Commissioners who set the policy for the management of wildlife in Arizona.

Earlier this week I talked to a lion biologist who told me of a standing joke among his colleagues, namely that “The only good lion is a managed lion, and the only managed lion is a dead lion.”

It is not my intent to attack the Arizona Game and Fish Department. I have worked with Game and Fish for many years and know that the vast majority of the people who work there – especially those who are “on the ground” are good and competent people. But since 1996 there has been what I perceive to be a terrible mismanagement of lions, and also bears. We need to seek more creative solutions to the challenges that these animals pose. While some may see the Sabino lion situation as being a problem, I think we should view it as an opportunity. The public interest generated by this controversy is encouraging. People care about these animals. Game and Fish should welcome, not fear, this public interest and involvement. Moreover, the time seems right to initiate some meaningful change in terms of education, management, and most importantly, the passing of badly needed legislation. I hope that we do not let this opportunity slip through our fingers.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns and offer recommendations on this issue.

Respectfully,

Steve Pavlik

4149 E. Waverly Street
Tucson, AZ 85712

(520) 327-0708